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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the legal basis for the National Library Board's national role for library development in Singapore. It examines the new National Library Board (NLB) Act 1995 and the direct and expanded responsibility it has given the NLB for the national and public library functions in Singapore. The paper also examines the various mechanisms the act provides for NLB to more concretely influence library development in the country as a whole. Highlights include: publicly-funded libraries; national projects; the endowment fund; manpower and training; working in consultation; and school libraries and other major library systems. (MES)

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The "national" role of the National Library board of Singapore

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Abstract

This paper primarily discusses the legal basis for the National Library Board's "national" role for library development in Singapore. It examines the new National Library Board Act 1995 and the direct and expanded responsibility it has given the NLB for the national and public library functions in Singapore. The paper also examines the various mechanisms the Act provides for NLB to more concretely influence library development in the country as a whole.

Paper

Introduction

1. In most countries, the national library board manages and is responsible for the national library. The library board is accountable for national library functions. The influence on library development of the country, as a whole, is restricted to library grants provided for library related research, collection development policies and library technical standards. In addition, the board advises the government on library issues that affect the library development in the country as a whole.

2. In Singapore, however, the National Library from the outset has been directly responsible for both the **national** library and the **public** library functions. This was provided for by the first National Library Act (NLA) of 1958. The public library provisions of the NLA 1958

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included the establishment of lending libraries to promote and to encourage the use of library materials as well as to make these materials available for loan and reference to the public.

3. On hindsight, the **dual functions** entrusted to the National Library have not been without adverse effects. With limited budget, the library was not able to fully develop its national library functions while simultaneously planning new and innovative public library programmes to reach out to the community. In fact, the National Library then mainly concentrated on its public library function to the detriment of its national library function. While the NLA 1958 established effective control over the public libraries and the National Library, it had little influence over the development of other libraries (libraries funded from the public purse - such as academic libraries) that also play important roles in information provision in Singapore. As a result, the library services in Singapore were not effectively coordinated and the nation's information resources were not fully optimised.

Library 2000

4. on and the Arts established the **Library 2000 Review Committee** to undertake a comprehensive review of the library services in the country against the changing environment and within the framework of **The Next Lap** - Singapore's blueprint for the future. The Committee was given the task of recommending how libraries could better serve Singaporeans in the 21st century.

5. its report, **Library 2000 : investing in a learning nation,** (hereafter cited as the Tan Chin Nam Report[1]) published in March 1994, the Committee defined the vision of the library of the future as being one of Acontinuously expanding the nation 's capacity to learn through a national network of libraries and information resource centres providing services and learning opportunities to support the advancement of Singapore.

6. To bring about the required transformation in the library services as envisioned in the report, the Committee recommended the setting up of a new statutory board to implement the recommendations in the **Tan Chin Nam Report.** Accordingly, a Bill to establish the **National Library Board** was passed in Parliament on 16 March 1995 and the National Library Board was set up on 1 September 1995.

National Library Board Act 1995

7. The National Library Board Act (NLBA) is a completely new legislation which bears little resemblance to the NLA 1958 that it replaces. It is much more comprehensive as it takes into consideration the limitations of the NLA 1958 as well as the recommendations in the **Tan Chin Nam Report.** It spells out clearly not only the functions of the National Library Board (NLB) but also its powers. It includes provisions relating to staffing and funding as well as the Board's assets and liabilities.

8. The NLBA establishes a policy-making Board with executive powers, giving the Board greater independence in decision making and more flexibility in administrative matters, such as personnel and finance issues. The Board centrally manages the national library (1) and the public libraries (16) in Singapore. In addition, it jointly develops and helps to administer the 40 Community Children's Libraries with the PAP People's Community Foundation.

9. The NLB is also in charge of 44 staff (including paraprofessional staff) working in the Government Department libraries and in the 11 junior college libraries. This control of additional manpower and the influence over special library services which the original National Library had never enjoyed before has further enhanced the role of the NLB. Through direct control of the librarians in the Government Department and junior college libraries, the various specialised library services and collections are coordinated and administered more efficiently. To effectively develop the three functional areas of the NLB, namely national,

public and Government Department/Junior college libraries, three separate directors have been appointed to be responsible for each one of them. This ensures that all the three types of libraries in the NLB system under the Chief Executive will be given equal emphasis and grow to play an important part in the total development of libraries in Singapore.

The extent of NLB's role in Libraries and Library Development in Singapore

10. The passing of the NLBA is a watershed in the development of libraries in Singapore. For the first time, a national organisation with sufficient powers has been set up not only to manage, oversee, control and coordinate the national, public, government library and junior college libraries' services in Singapore but also to influence the library development in the country as a whole. The NLBA has also expanded the legal deposit provision to include the deposit of non-print materials.

11. To facilitate this, the NLBA has broadened the definition of the term '**library materials** to include both print and non-print materials as follows:

a. any printed book, periodical, newspaper, pamphlet, musical score, map, chart, plan, picture, photograph, print and any other printed matter; and

b. any film (including a microfilm and a microfiche), negative, tape, disc, sound track and any other device in which one or more visual images, sounds or other data are embodied so as to be capable (with or without the aid of some other equipment) of being reproduced from it.

12. This revision facilitates the development of a comprehensive and in-depth collection of Singapore materials. The NLB can now develop not only a world-class public library system, but also pave the way to develop the National Library as the most important centre for reference and research on Singapore.

Publicly-funded Libraries

13. Though the NLB only has direct authority over the national, public, government department and junior college libraries, it can exert effective influence over library development in Singapore as a whole. The influence over the library system in Singapore as a whole is exercised indirectly through the powers vested in the NLB over **publicly-funded libraries**, which are defined in the NLB Act as Aall libraries owned by the Government or any statutory body and such other libraries which are, directly or indirectly, funded by the Government (whether fully or partially) as the Board may determine. Almost all libraries in Singapore, except corporate libraries, are in this sense publicly-funded[2]. The NLB's powers and potential influence over the library development process in Singapore are therefore extensive and far-reaching.

National Projects

14. In cases of library projects and services that are strategically infrastructural in nature, such as a network of borderless libraries, the national union catalogue and the access to the various collections of the libraries in Singapore, the participation of publicly-funded libraries appears mandatory. For instance, in Section 7(2)(b) of the NLBA, the NLB is required Ato develop a computer network of libraries in Singapore and in Section 7(2)(d), it is authorised Ato coordinate and facilitate access to library materials in all publicly-funded libraries.

15. In a similar vein, Section 11 of the NLBA requires all publicly-funded libraries to contribute their cataloguing and holding records to the Board for the establishment of an up-to-date National Union Catalogue (NUC). The establishment of an NUC to reflect the

bibliographic records of the library resources available in all the publicly-funded libraries is consistent with the vision in the **Tan Chin Nam Report** for a **borderless** library network. At present, of the 500 publicly-funded libraries in Singapore, 131 participate in the Singapore Integrated Library Automation Service (SILAS), which is the NLB's bibliographic network. The Act will eventually bring the rest of the publicly-funded libraries into the network.

16. Section 12 of the NLBA requires all publicly-funded libraries to participate in an inter-library loan scheme that may be established by the Board. The NUC complements the inter-library loan scheme. It is useless to know that a particular piece of information that is needed by a user is available in Singapore unless the user also has access to it. This provision in the NLBA will lead to a more systematic inter-library lending among publicly-funded libraries and will foster a more active and positive attitude towards inter-library cooperation.

17. Section 7(2)(c) of the NLBA gives NLB powers *Ato define, develop and implement the national collection policy and strategy and appoint different libraries and centres to collect library materials on different subject areas of importance and interest to Singapore*. This will rationalise the development of library collections and minimise any wastage. Clearly defined and focused collection policies will lead to the emergence of specialised libraries and services. The library that the NLB appoints to specialise in certain subject areas will likely be one that is already developing its collection extensively in those areas, such as law and medicine in the National University of Singapore Law and Medical Libraries. Libraries that have developed over-lapping collections to serve their clients in certain fringe areas might find specialisation an inconvenience. However, the need to develop a national network of libraries that effectively integrates all the individual collections and services of the libraries into a whole cannot be ignored.

Endowment Fund

18. The NLBA has empowered the NLB to establish a National Library Board **Endowment Fund** (Section 23). This enables the Board to solicit donations from private individuals and corporations. This Fund, when it is fully operational, can be used to finance library development and programmes, such as the provision of training and scholarships for librarians or other persons working in the libraries, addresses on library topics by distinguished speakers, sponsorships of major library promotional programmes and research on reading and librarianship. The NLB has been granted the status of an Institution of Public Character, thus exempting contributions to NLB from income tax. The NLB will use the resources of the Endowment Fund to fund or subsidize projects and research that determine the strategic directions of the library policies of the country. This will be an additional avenue to influence publicly-funded libraries and to initiate changes where necessary.

Manpower and Training

19. The NLB is also given greater powers to ensure that personnel for libraries in Singapore are adequately trained and equipped with the right and relevant skills. The NLB can influence library training through Section 6(e) which gives the power *Ato establish standards for the training of library personnel in Singapore*. This power enables the Board to play an active role in the training of the information professionals and library workers. Library training programmes that do not meet their standards may not be endorsed. The NLB has worked closely with the Nanyang Technological University to develop post-graduate library training programmes and also with the Temasek Polytechnic on para-professional training programmes to ensure that the training provided is not only relevant but of the necessary standards. The NLB also provides scholarships for its staff enrolled in the courses. It can use its resources from the Endowment Fund for this purpose. The Board has undertaken short training programmes for library professionals and library workers at all levels. The NLB has set up the National Library Board Institute (NLBI) for this purpose.

Working in Consultation

20. The NLBA has vested the new NLB with the authority to transform the vision of up-to-date library services into a reality. A statutory board with a national mandate has this influence over library development in Singapore. The NLBA is a pragmatic piece of legislation. It creates a national body to oversee and direct the national and public library policies in Singapore. It gives the NLB full control of the public and national library systems as well as library staff in the Government Department and junior college libraries. The NLB has authority to implement certain library policies that are national in nature, such as library networking and national collection policies, that will benefit the library community and Singaporeans as a whole. All publicly-funded libraries would be required to participate in some key projects such as the NUC and interlibrary loan scheme. However, the participating libraries will be consulted in the planning and implementation of these projects. Section 12 of the NLBA states that *Aall publicly-funded libraries **shall participate** in such schemes for interlibrary loan and interlibrary information services as may be established by the Board in **consultation** with such libraries* As for other general policies and administration of publicly-funded libraries, its jurisdiction seems to be more of an advisory nature as Section 6(h) of the NLBA suggests:

*Ato **advise** the Government on national needs and policies in respect of matters relating to publicly-funded libraries and library information services in Singapore.*

School Libraries and other major library systems

21. The advisory or consultative role of the NLB becomes clear when we examine the relationship of NLB vis-a-vis school libraries that are directly under the Ministry of Education (MOE). The NLB can effectively influence the development of school libraries development through the provision of advisory and consultancy services. Accordingly both parties have established a Steering Committee to promote and to provide an excellent school library service that supports Ministry of Education's vision of AThinking Schools, Learning Nation. Intitially, the two institutions will look into collaborating in the following areas:

i. Centralised acquisition of library materials in all formats

ii. Collection development in school libraries

iii. Development of library facilities in new schools

iv. Development of library services in schools

22. The NLB will work with the MOE and study how it can best help to widen the range of the materials in school libraries, promote and enable resource sharing, reduce duplication of library materials and improve the effectiveness of school libraries to support the teaching and information needs of MOE and the school community in general. The NLB plans to initially pilot this collaboration at one school so that the results and benefits of the NLB's efforts can be fully demonstrated. The NLB 's collaboration with the MOE is bound to succeed as it already manages 11 junior college libraries which also come under the management of the MOE.

23. Closer co-operation and collaboration with other large library systems in Singapore in projects that are not 'national ' are also being promoted through both formal and informal means. This is evidenced by the on-going exploratory discussions with the newest university, Singapore Management University (S.M.U.) to outsource to the NLB the management and delivery of its library and information services. In this context, the NLB also hopes to establish a Council of Chief Librarians comprising academic and research libraries in Singapore to foster greater coooperation and collaboration amongst them.

Conclusion

24. In crafting the NLBA, the legislators understood that if the NLB 's powers were merely **advisory** in all aspects of library work, it would not be able to function effectively as a National Library Board that steers library development towards national goals. The NLBA therefore provides the NLB with these powers but it also recognises that such authority cannot be so absolute as to infringe on the autonomy of other publicly-funded libraries in Singapore. The NLB is an effective institution that is able to oversee, direct and optimise the libraries it manages and, at the same time, influence library and information services on a national level. Developing countries may incorporate some of its more salient and innovative features when restructuring their national library services so that they may leapfrog and position their libraries as their nation 's information gateway. However, it is imperative to note that an effective legislation and a national institution are not sufficient. The authorities must put in place a dynamic leadership at the helm and ensure the provision of sufficient funds to translate the vision into reality.

Endnotes:

1. Dr Tan Chin Nam was the Chairman of the Library 2000 Review Committee which issued this report. He is currently the Chairman of the National Library Board.

2. There are approximately 600 libraries in Singapore. National Library (1), public libraries (16), Community Children=s Libraries (40), academic libraries (6), special libraries (150) and school libraries (375).

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